

As clouds of war are
upon us, and California
National Guard troops
mobilize once again, it's
time to say...

good bye for awhile

**By Specialist Jay Seidel and
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ANYWHERE ELSE, AND it would have been just a picnic. On an especially warm February day, fathers held babies in their arms, while teen-agers ate barbecue, talked on their cell phones, and played ping-pong. Mothers and wives sat and chatted as if they were old friends. But this barbecue – and six others at armories throughout Southern California – had a bittersweet ending. Before the tongs were cleaned and with food still laying out, most of those in attendance would kiss family members good-bye, sling duffel bags over their shoulders, and board buses to begin a yearlong Homeland Defense deployment.

For more than 500 soldiers from the 578th Engineer Battalion and 144th Field Artillery of the 40th Infantry Division, these impromptu armory get-togethers marked a last few hours with loved ones before shipping out for their mission: augmenting security at nine California Air Force bases.





PHOTO BY SFC KEN DRYLIE

Sergeant Daniel Armenia comforts his daughter, Carissa, as he boards a bus to begin a yearlong Homeland Defense deployment.

With the world's attention focused on possible war with Iraq, and the nation seeming to creep back into normalcy after the 9-11 attacks, the Homeland Defense mission was the last thing many soldiers expected.

"I walked out to the mailbox one day and found a letter notifying me that we had been activated. My wife and I were both surprised," said Corporal Eduardo Lorpoc of Moreno Valley. "I have been in the California National Guard for 17 years and this is the first time I have ever been deployed."

The timing is especially tough on Michelle Rivas, wife of Specialist Dalvin Montoya-

"My employer has been supportive and said 'Contact me when you return so you can get back to work,'" said Specialist Anthony Self from Temecula, who is deploying with A Company, 578th Engineer Battalion.

Private First Class Tim Meyers, a full-time student from Beaumont, has made arrangements to continue his studies in civil engineering once he gets to his duty station.

Specialist Timothy Scaife, from La Habra, spent four-and-a-half years as a Marine, and was deployed three times. Now, a title coordinator for First American Title, he and his wife Liz, have a 5-month-old baby. "My

Members of Battery B, 144th Field Artillery, stand in formation as they prepare to deploy for a yearlong Homeland Defense mission protecting California Air Force bases.



PHOTO BY SFC KEN DRYLIE

Rivas from Palmdale, who is six months pregnant with their first child.

"It's hard but I support him and will miss him," she said, with tears in her eyes.

Specialist John Endman, from Cypress, spent some quiet last moments with his wife, Amy, and two sons, Joshua, 8, and Caleb, 6, before deploying. Joshua leaned against his father as they sat on duffel bags outside the Long Beach armory of Company B, 578th Engineer Battalion, waiting for the inevitable good-bye. "He's going to miss the baby," Amy said. "It's nicer that he's staying in the state."

In addition to leaving their families, soldiers had to leave jobs as well.

wife wouldn't marry me until I got out of the Marine Corps because of the high risk of deployments, but here we are and with a baby, too," Scaife said.

Family members said they understood the importance of their spouses' duty. "I think what they're doing is good. Otherwise who would fight for us or protect us?" said Theresa Esquivel, wife of Corporal Jesus Esquivel, from B Company, 578th Engineer Battalion. "Now I have to be a single paren--and strong--so that my husband can do his mission with a clear mind." *Additional reporting by Specialist Tammy Gann, Sergeant First Class Ken Drylie, and Master Sergeant Joanne Frazier* 🐾